History of the Platypus critique

Tom Carey, Omair Hussain, Spencer A. Leonard, Ian Morrison, and Ed Remus

On April 7, 2018, as part of its 10th annual International Convention, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted the discussion "History of the Platypus critique" at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The panel was made up of Platypus members who addressed different phases of the history of Platypus and its engagement with the Left: Ian Morrison (first phase: anti-war movement / anti-imperialism), Spencer A. Leonard (second phase: the "Marxist turn" / IBT,[1] CPGB[2] engagement), Tom Carey (third phase: #Occupy / Marxism and anarchism), Ed Remus (protracted fourth phase: SYRIZA, Podemos / "What is political party for the Left?"), and Omair Hussain (fourth and 1/2 phase: the "socialist turn" / Millennial Left). The event was moderated by Erin Hagood. An edited transcript follows.[3]

Opening remarks

Ian Morrison: I was talking with someone in Berkeley, an older Leftist who has been around the groups in the area and a serial member of far-Left groups. He has joined the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) now and he went to a big DSA meeting where they were getting undergrads involved, getting people to sign up to do their canvassing campaign for single-payer healthcare. He told me about it and said, "Aren't the young people interested in global peace? Why is there no peace activism; why is it all about healthcare?" He's from the 60s. Being asked to talk about the anti-war movement,[4] I was taken back to this time, trying to reconstruct my own thinking in this period, and I had a hard time. I will walk through some of my own perspectives of this time. They seem distant now.

It was at this time, when I was in college here, that I took a look at the Left and solidarity campaigns that were ongoing and that happened in the past in Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. This seems so out of place now, especially with the Arab Spring, the ongoing war in Syria, in Yemen, etc. The Left does talk a bit about Rojava, but it's different from this early period. At that time, there was an essay by Moishe Postone, "History and Helplessness" (2006)[5] that was popular in our milieu. In this essay, he called out that the Left didn't have a sustained critical analysis of movements in the Middle East. In Postone's view, most analyses on the Left were wedded to an outmoded Cold War dualistic perspective. It didn't have an adequate framework for understanding the end of what he described as the Fordist synthesis, globally, and how this was unraveling in the Middle East. He points to an UN report about the extreme economic collapse that had happened since the 1970s in the Middle East. Clearly a political gap was filled by these absolutist states in the Gulf region, but also the older — for the lack of a better term — "modernizing programs" (of Arab nationalism, Baathism, the Shah, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan), became undone.

It was in this context of the 1950s, but also of the 70s, to 9/11, which was of course on our mind at that time. I was interested in looking at the Left groups in these regions and how they had disintegrated — also how anti-imperialism, both in the contemporary U.S. but also in the past, had been used. We did deep studies of the relationship of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and the Baath Parties' rise to power, a long reading group that was about the Iranian Revolution; we read articles by the New Left figure Fred Halliday about Afghanistan. A lot of the Left was interested in describing the character of various reactionary movements in the region.

One curious thing from early Platypus is the ICP, which maybe sounds obscure, but there were some interesting things about them. We actually read a statement that they wrote after Saddam Hussein had fallen.[6] They were the main organizers of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, which was a vehicle of international solidarity campaigns that happened in Europe, in the British Labour Party, and in the U.S. We went to an event where the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations was hosting people involved in trade unions in Iraq. The ICP had some controversial statements for the Left. They had entered the Governing Council before the first election and they wrote something in their statement that I'm sure will sound controversial to people:

> We struggle for creating the conditions for the withdrawal of foreign troops at the earliest possible time. However, we believe that calling for their immediate withdrawal does not take into consideration the sharp current polarization in our country, the existence of paramilitary organizations, and the insufficient preparedness of the Iraqi security forces. Hence we call for a timetable for withdrawal together with doubling the efforts to provide the internal political, institutional and security conditions for this withdrawal.[7]

This was controversial on the Left, certainly in the West — people referred to them as "lackeys for U.S. imperialism." The ICP was obviously not speaking at anti-war demonstrations because they were not liked. This was interesting to me because it seemed that the Left didn't have a common international politics in the context of the anti-war movement. Processing the history of the Left, it had a complete breakdown; groups in different regions had conflicting perspectives. I was drawn to the ending of "History and Helplessness," where Postone writes, "However difficult the task of grasping and confronting global capital might be, it is crucially important that a global internationalism be recovered and reformulated."[8]

This all raised a lot of classical formulas and problems that I was being introduced to: the role of the working class as well as the trajectory of the old communist parties. I didn't know that there was a communist revolution in Afghanistan. I didn't know about the Tudeh Party of Iran and other groups. We experienced the splits that came out of the 1960s generation, the Third-Worldist orientation, a big group that I would call the liberal anti-fascist perspective — a Christopher Hitchens alongside with softer versions of that — and of course groups that did solidarity campaigns. Strangest of all were the actual Left groups from the Middle East. We did some events with the Worker-communist Party of Iran and the Worker-communist Party of Iraq,[9] which are from the 90s era.[10]

These orientations had different estimations of the U.S. and Europe. At one extreme, there were Habermas and Derrida who thought that Europe should counterbalance the U.S. On the other extreme, there was the already mentioned Christopher Hitchens, who thought that the U.S. played a progressive imperialist role. There were groups and individuals who thought that the resistance could play a progressive role — the Socialist Workers Party in Britain (SWP (UK)) has the most extreme view here.

These small groups actually were actors in the Middle East. The memory of a lot of these older USSR-aligned parties in the Middle East, which were bigger in the 50s and 60s, raised questions like, was there a progressive bourgeois national force that could be supported in these countries? Was it possible to have a two-stage revolution for democracy to come to Iraq? You also got the more ambiguous "permanent revolution" type stances that certain Trotskyist and Maoist groups had. They thought that revolution was possible and it would happen by kicking out the U.S.

For me it was vexing that the Left adopted a certain kind of language from 19th-century socialism and also the language of Lenin, but it didn't connect to the *concept* of socialism. It often didn't even connect to the older notion of self-determination — much of the time it was a vague discussion of "democracy" rather than socialism, and that was more of a contentious space. It obliquely raises something that is more contemporary about what was the meaning of the old — what Marxists called "bourgeois" — revolutions like the American Revolution: could one of these countries in the Middle East have a revolution?

These groups and their strange perspectives on this conflict led Platypus and me to look at the deeper history of Marx and older events, like the 1848 Revolution, and what that meant for what socialists in the past thought politics were.

Spencer Leonard: In Platypus presentations, I tend to use the *Platypus Review* (*PR*) and my email as primary resources. I dug up what Chris wrote by way of an Org. Comm. report from the end of the third phase and on to the fourth phase, which is helpful to set the tone for my comments:

> The challenge of Platypus is in integrating and assimilating the various different layers of recent historical experience among our members, without throwing off those who were encouraged in one direction, only to find that direction sidelined with new shifts of emphasis. A major resource for Platypus is the archive we generate through the publication of the *Platypus Review*, which embodies our own historical record. We must be patient and systematic in our work, recognizing the potential frustration of not being able to immediately recognize the effects of our efforts, which can only remain obscurely cumulative. Increasingly, it will become important to systematically acculturate new members to the history of Platypus itself, in order to arm them adequately for participation in our project. This will mean, necessarily, re-treading what for many of our veteran members will seem well-worn and perhaps already worn-out paths. We need to struggle against such jadedness. All our members require the full benefit of all our (prior, accumulated) work. It is the task of existing and long-term members to accept and fulfill responsibility for recovering the history of our project with new people.

I'm awful when it comes to my own personal history and I couldn't reach my wife in time to ask her the details of the past. Still, this much I know: I first became good friends with Chris after 9/11 — my wife remembers the date when he first came over to our house for dinner, which was in the fall of 2001. I also remember by way of pre-Platypus experience, Sunit and I attending the SWP (UK) conference that prompted Chris and young members of Platypus to draft "What is a Platypus? On surviving the extinction of the Left," sometime in the summer of 2006.[11] Someday I will go back and disinter the emails that Chris and I exchanged around this time and after, especially those after, as it was at this time that, at their urging, Chris and his students set aside the older conception of Platypus as a journal project in favor of the reading group and, eventually, The Platypus Affiliated Society.

Chris used to write to me lengthy emails about the formation of the reading group in the spring of 2006, telling me about the young students — including Ian — about the antagonism of Parker and John Abromeit and the staging of the first panel discussion. I remember sitting in smoke-filled internet cafés in Delhi and Kolkata, reading Chris's emails and penning lengthy queries in response.

It was not until I returned to this country in September or October 2008 that I genuinely encountered Platypus, the live beast, whose poisonous sting induces hallucinogenic visions of Marx and Lenin. It was then that I encountered the *PR*

About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s–30s), "New" (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open

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politically as well as ideologically. It was no accident that most of our ex-members — in other words, ex-members of Platypus specifically — eventually gravitated to the DSA, specifically, and not to Third-Worldist anarchism. This happened for the same reason that our Adolph Reed interview proved so popular when it was published in 2015. The official multiculturalism of the Democratic Party Center could only keep its progressive and labor constituencies from growing restive for so long. During the fourth phase, many of our members attended the *Jacobin* reading groups which brought recent post-grads, young academics, and young professionals (often working in non-profit or social-service organizations) together across the country. Discussion frequently turned to the successes and failures of anti-austerity political parties in Europe, mainly SYRIZA and to a lesser extent Podemos. The *Jacobin* reading-group imagination was typically one of incubating such a party within the Democratic Party, either to transform the Party itself or to eventually break away and form a new party. Such a party would capture the discontents of the Occupy generation and wield them in defense of the welfare state and against austerity. The ex-members who have since joined the DSA and taken up something like this perspective — often capping their aims at the eventual emergence of a labor party in the U.S. — came to characterize Platypus as a sectarian organization, undertaking educational work but lacking any sense of political vision or organizational know-how that could even possibly become actionable in our lifetimes. To them we were or are an incipiently political project that would never actually affect its desired vision. They themselves, however, could practice the Marxist politics that Platypus merely preached. After all, if Platypus had no stated, desired political activity in the present, then it must be on some level content, implicitly though never avowedly, to leave the political field to the social democrats. What would socialist politics look like in the present, if not working for socialism within the labor movement, and to defend the welfare state? The party question would grow out of that work.

This points to the greatest risk we encountered as a project during this period: that we were simply arming and equipping people intellectually to take up the cudgels of the social-democratic, laborist side within the Democratic Party's intensified internecine faction feud between its ethnic- or racial-community constituency wings and its welfarist labor movement wings. The Left thought it knew which side we were on; after all, with Reed, Juliet Mitchell, John D'Emilio, and Theodor Adorno on our syllabus, we had gained a reputation for being the most theoretically sophisticated critics of identity politics on the American Left. I was even asked once, by a hostile but polite *Jacobin* reading-group organizer, if the rumor was true that Platypus planned to take over the labor movement. Notice, no one would ever ask us if we plan to take over identity-based, ethnic-constituency organizing. Many of our members had either written for or played some staff role in *Jacobin*, and one of our longtime members now serves on the staff of *Catalyst*. Indeed, even Bhaskar Sunkara was attracted to Platypus early on and had some brush with our pedagogy while preparing to become a Left entrepreneur.

This was also the period when a number of Platypus members became involved in the Chicago Socialist Campaign (CSC) that was sparked by the success of Kshama Sawant in gaining a Seattle City Council seat. This was an initiative by Socialist Alternative (SAlt) and ended up being a practical Left-unity project here in Chicago. A number of Left groups here — like the International Socialist Organization (ISO), the DSA, SAlt, and Solidarity — were able to forge a loose organizational cooperation, after the CSC's decision ultimately not to take Chris Cutrone up on his offer to run for alderman in Uptown under the banner of the CSC but to run Jorge Mujica for a difference aldermanic race here in Chicago. They were hoping that they would be able to pick up each other's members, newly politicized progressives or some Occupy remnants that had gravitated to the CSC. But when the question was posed to SAlt, at the Labor Notes Conference following the CSC, what everyone should do on that basis, now that the CSC was over and if SAlt would lead the gathered forces to create the Chicago Socialist Party, SAlt said: "No, what you should do is join SAlt." Obviously, that reveals a lot of limitations reminiscent of those of the CPGB model of Left unity on a programmatic basis. At the same time, these groups did work together when they thought they could get something out of the activist milieu — the organizing work that was being done. They did it self-servingly for their own organizations, but they still ended up doing it to a degree that was remarkable here.

These remarks reflect above all my own political recollections of the fourth phase. It is perhaps overdetermined that these recollections would focus on the DSA and *Jacobin*, and the way in which our project became unconsciously caught up in the Democratic Party's internecine "social democracy vs. identity politics" factional conflict. I'm a white guy from the suburbs. I've spent my entire life in Platypus as a post-graduate worker. I've spent most of my life working in the public sector and in the academy, and most of my friends work in schools and nonprofits. Whatever happens to the professional-managerial class happens to my milieu and therefore to me, unfortunately. This certainly includes the American Left's fourth-phase-era preparations to attempt to reconstitute progressive welfare laborism within the Democratic Party. I realize that I've addressed the fourth phase in a limited fashion and from a provincially American perspective, as well. But the phenomena I've described are at least part of the story of the fourth phase.

An organization holding its 10th annual Convention can no longer claim to stand apart from or prior to the status-quo division of labor on the Left. I remember the fourth phase as the one during which the Platypus critique *of Platypus* turned on the fact that we had helped to produce some of the sharpest members of the DSA. Would this become our default drift, disavowed but de facto — or, would we consciously interrupt it, at the level of our pedagogy? I see our "socialist turn" as, among other things, marking our definitive embrace of the latter path. This turn has allowed us to become a Platypus for our audience once again.

Omair Hussain: What does it mean to say that Platypus is the psychoanalyst of the Left?[40] Thinking through this analogy can provide some clarity about the Platypus project and its relationship to the existing Left.

Freud never had a prescriptive conception of health. In fact, for Freud, mental health existed on a spectrum, and was not a difference in kind. In other words, for Freud, the difference between a healthy and an unhealthy psyche was not a difference in two kinds of psyches, but a difference in how the psyches expressed degrees of mental illness on a spectrum. For Freud, we are all neurotic, repressed, and pathological. The question is, to what degree? There is no sharp line of division between health and illness, but only a spectrum of gradations. Freud did not have a predetermined concept of health, but recognized that we were all healthy and unhealthy at the same time, and that this expressed itself in symptoms to varying degrees.

If Platypus is the psychoanalyst of the Left, then the Left's health or illness must be conceptualized the same way. The Left is not ill according to a pre-established idea of health, or according to some abstract schema used to measure its vitality. There is no sharp line dividing the Left's illness from its health, its death from its previous life or its potential rebirth. Platypus has no predetermined idea of what a truly living, healthy Left would look like. That is why to say that the Left is dead is not simply a moral condemnation of the existing Left for failing to meet abstract criteria of being "healthy" or "alive." Rather, the Left is ill or dead according to its own history, in relation to what it once was and what it imagined itself to be. Perhaps this is far from self-evident, at least for the Left. For Freud, the point of psychoanalysis was not to simply declare to the patient that they are ill, to get the patient to recognize objective truth outside of their subjectivity, or to provide answers for their health, but instead to engage in a process where the patient comes to recognize and become self-conscious of their own illness. We have no prescription for what ails the Left. All we can do is work through the symptoms of this illness.

Thus, it is important to note that the different phases in the Platypus project are not marked by Platypus's own preoccupations in the abstract, or by what we think the Left should be talking about. Rather, our phases are marked by the historically shifting symptoms expressed by the Left itself, the patient's own preoccupations. In demarcating different phases in Platypus, we are merely trying to objectify the different orientations and positions the Left has taken in the last decade, which are the most acute symptoms expressing the Left's illness.

This should be kept in mind when addressing the latest phase in Platypus, the "socialist turn." The rise of "socialist" rhetoric and sentiment on the Left seems to many a sign of optimism, an expression of the Left's growth, an expression of a potential new life for Leftism and socialism. Platypus sees things differently. We recognize that the Left's changing preoccupations, like the return of "socialism" we are seeing now, are only different symptoms expressing the death of the Left.

However, like Freud, we have to address these symptoms as neither inevitable nor unchangeable, as neither unreal nor merely "subjective," as something more than simply a product of the patient's own delusions. We must deal with these symptoms as a product and constituent of objectivity, but also as changeable, as something that can be overcome.

This is what we mean when we say in Platypus that the existing Left might be an obstacle to socialism. Its solutions to the problem are the symptoms of its irrelevance. They themselves express the problem.

But there is no way around this. We are all expressions of the problem, to a more-or-less self-conscious degree. If Rosa Luxemburg was accurate in her prognosis one-hundred years ago that the choice was between socialism and barbarism,[41] then we must concede that the last 100 years of social life have been barbaric. We are a product of the Counterrevolution. We are all expressions of a barbaric world. We all express symptoms of a world without a Left.

The question is, what to do about it? Faced with a similar situation of barbarism in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin wrote in "Experience and Poverty," "Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism."[42] What would it mean to recognize the positive aspect, the potential, of our barbaric moment? It would mean registering how this barbarism could be transformed, on the basis of the barbarity itself. There is no way around, but only through.

The problem with the Millennial Left is that it does not take the progressive character of barbarism seriously enough. It does not take the progressive character of the barbaric present seriously enough. It expresses moral outrage at the world as it is, with no real prospects of changing it. It affirms its own impotence as a criterion for "correct" ideology.

And yet the world changes. The Left is content in expressing outrage at the character of these changes that seem to happen from "above" without recognizing how their own discontents are bound up with these changes.

The recent "socialist turn" is an expression of the Left's fundamental inability to deal with changes that happen in capitalism. Socialism in this context is framed as anti-capitalism, as "resistance" to the powers that be. In other words, socialism means resisting Trump. Socialism means resisting the changes that are being brought about in society. Socialism is no longer an expression of the desire for the new or different, but instead a desire for a return to an imagined more equitable status quo — for example, I recently saw a meme that said FDR was a democratic socialist.

As Chris Cutrone put in a recent article in the *Platypus Review*, "The Millennial Left was not defeated by Bush, Obama, Hillary, or Trump. No. They have consistently defeated themselves. They failed to ever even *become* themselves as something distinctly new and different, but instead continued the same old 1980s *modus operandi* inherited from the failure of the 1960s New Left."[43]

The Millennial Left's lack of historical self-consciousness spells its doom. It repeats history without recognizing it. It remains tethered to past moments in the grim history of the defeat of the Left, without self-awareness about this fact.

The Millennial Left did not point a way forward out of the dead-end projects of the New Left and postmodernism, but rather inherited and naturalized these failed ideological enterprises with their limited political horizons as their intellectual backdrop.

The irony is that the Millennial Left thinks that its socialism is something new, a Marxism 2.0, updated with the struggles of a plethora of oppressed identities previously neglected. Intersectionality is viewed as a novel concept. But perhaps the Millennial Left is not new enough. It unconsciously reproduces intellectual frameworks that were not only inherited from past moments in the history of the defeat of the Left, but that themselves were products of even earlier defeats. Historical regression means a continued inheritance of lower and lower political horizons and possibilities. The real tragedy is that this unconscious repetition of inheriting lowered political horizons is celebrated as the "new!"

The Millennial Left affirms this condition of lowered political horizons and possibilities. It rejoices in its own impotence. Politics is reduced to a question of abstract morality or ethics, or else expressions of identity. Socialism is reduced to a lifestyle, an alternative way of living, according to an abstract set of "socialist" principles. The question of actually fundamentally transforming the world is completely bracketed, because it is thought impossible.

Thus, the "socialist turn," far from an expression of a renewed strength on the Left, is a symptom of the Left's continued helplessness and impotence in the face of circumstances that it has participated in creating, but that confront it as something foreign and alien.

This is the real pathology of the Left. It continually reconstitutes the domination it wants to overcome precisely on the basis of its discontents against this domination. What would it mean to overcome this pathology? Platypus has no answer. All we can do, like Freud, is attempt to provoke recognition in the patient of its pathology. Freud's goal was to strengthen the ego of the patient through self-consciousness. If the patient could be made conscious of the pathology, perhaps that would point to its overcoming. We seek to incite the same kind of self-recognition and self-overcoming on the Left. Freud's goal was to increase the patient's freedom through self-mastery. Our goal is the same for the history of humanity.

Q&A

I don't always pay that much attention to the phases, but before Trump's election, I had the feeling that, if Trump were elected, it would constitute the fifth phase. And I'm surprised by the sense that it doesn't feel like we are in a fifth phase. Instead of the term "fifth phase," we use the term "second decade." Do you feel that we are out of the fourth phase and into a new phase? Would someone recruited to Platypus after Trump's election be experiencing a new phase in Platypus?

ER: I was thinking about this with respect to the Sanders campaign and the growth of the DSA. In Platypus, we have tried to track the phases not so much on a purely internal basis, but on the basis of the phases on the Left. What seems interesting about our moment is that the Left seems to have changed considerably. Although in the long view we predict this to be a bubble — and we are probably right — in the short term, at the least the American Left feels different with the DSA having 30,000 members — I'm not sure about the exact number. I'm not sure exactly whether or how our members are intersecting that, but insofar as the Left is an adjunct of the Democratic Party and there are some real changes — or at least attempted changes — taking place within the Democratic Party. That is where we would want to look to answer this question.

IM: I am also fuzzy on the importance of the phases, but one thing that I notice is the loss of the New Left as an interlocutor for Platypus. At the beginning of the project, we were riding a certain anti-New Left sentiment that was around. This continues in a way that people don't understand: the New Left had a much higher horizon for politics than current movements. And the New Left had a richer and more sophisticated intellectual milieu than we are able to replicate as a group. This is a more distant realization that people have now, as we tend to emphasize the Second International in our pedagogy more. Our engagements with people from the New Left have been our most fruitful ultimately.

OH: The phases are about the Left and the Left's preoccupations. It's not about what Platypus thinks the Left should be talking about. In terms of the fourth and 1/2 phase or the Trump phenomenon: the socialist phenomenon, the DSA, and the Bernie Sanders phenomenon are responses to the crisis of neoliberalism, which is expressed in Trump. It doesn't seem to necessitate a new phase as much as it expresses what the Left was already banking on: that the crisis of neoliberalism expresses itself through Trump, and that socialism is the answer to Trump. It's really about Trump. I don't know whether this necessitates a new phase in the sense that I think Trump really deepens or substantiates the Left's claim to socialism.

SL: Early on in Platypus, there was the question of the sectarian Left, the presence of the sectarian Left which was how the New Left appeared to us — the groups that were on the Left particularly in the anti-war movement. The frustration with the intractability of that sectarian environment was an originary experience of Platypus, but it gradually posed itself as the party question, which I don't think it quite did early on. One level of red thread of the pedagogy of the first decade is the emergence of the party question plainly, and that also relates to the issue of the Campaign for a Socialist Party (CSP), etc. As far as the second phase is concerned, you could see that the discussion of Lukács on the "politics of Critical Theory" panel with Cutrone, Feenberg, Westerman, and Brown became a question about political form in a way that I had never experienced before, in how the New Left treated him, through which I had received Lukács. This new treatment came up in and through our engagements with Marxism as well as through our attempts to instantiate our project in relationship to the Left and to engage the Left.

Obviously, the frustration with the election of Trump was on the one hand: it was clear that the Millennials are not going to be sectarians, and on the other hand, that even the sectarians were — plainly — all Democrats in 2016. The total liquidation of the Left and the diminishing way in which you could recover a New Left sensibility became palpable. The sectarian Left at least — as frustrating as it was — preserved a certain memory, which we now see just falling into incoherence. In that sense, it has not been a fifth phase so much as a second decade.

The psychoanalysis analogy raises the question of who the audience is, who the patient is. The patient is the person who is examined by the psychoanalyst. But our audience isn't necessarily the Left itself, but rather students or the general public. Who is the primary audience of this psychoanalysis or investigation? Are the phases our recognition of history or does it change corresponding to whom we are trying to engage?

OH: There are obviously a lot of holes in this analogy, since psychoanalysis is not applicable to a social body in the same way as to an individual; it's not easily translatable. As far as Platypus is concerned, the patient is society. All the Left is to us is — or rather all that it once was — the most acute symptom of society. A social body as a patient would be expressed most acutely through the Left. And we see this to be the case — it's not as interesting to talk to the Right; they don't express the symptoms as acutely.

SL: Addressing and recruiting students is addressing the Left, because the Left, like us, are vampiric — you live off of the young; you have to recruit young people. By trying to interpose ourselves between the Left and the ability to reproduce and to educate a new generation, by trying to be the ones who issue the invitations to campus and to be a constant presence in their engagement with the young, we are directly addressing the Left. These are not unrelated.

ER: Thinking of our project as one that takes up the problems and tasks of Marxism, we have to be sober about the state of Marxism today and its uses and abuses. By whom is it used and abused? By the activist and the academic Left. If you want to prepare a young person to hit the pavement and to be a labor organizer or to support an ethnic-based community organization, and they are interested in becoming more radical, you are going to give them, perhaps, some Lenin — whether you are in the DSA, RCP, etc. This is a patented part of social reproduction in our world and Marxism plays a role in it. We intervene at that level, so it's acutely pitched in this sense and when I look at how and why people have come to our project, it relates to those phenomena. They have been politicized and had some interest in Marx, Marxism, socialism, Leninism, etc. — either through their professors or through activists and organizing work, all of which falls under the umbrella of the Democratic Party today. We have our work cut out for us as long as that remains the case.

Could you speak about the international growth of Platypus? By the time I joined, there was already an international presence; I take this for granted. How has this presented challenges or further opportunities?

IM: Platypus's growth was unexpected, but it is also part of the cross-section of global student life. Our growth to Germany, which was the first place with growth outside of the U.S., was because some people from Germany studied in Chicago and did a Google search along the lines of "Chicago Adorno," and Platypus showed up, so they started coming to our reading group. It's funny, the international growth hadn't been pre-planned. No Platypus growth has been pre-planned, like "next year, France!" — It would be great if you could do that. Most of it has just already been happening, linked to how events take place on the Left. It's not coincidental that people in Greece became interested at the particular time they did. The same applies to Germany, it had to do with the collapse of the Antideutsch milieus. Similarly, we had a lot of engagements with the Iranian Left at a particular time. The U.S. and its university structure are international phenomena and we, by focusing on students, hit upon it.

SL: There is also the spread to Great Britain. It's remarkable when you look back at old issues of the *PR* — people like James Heartfield and David Black, presenting themselves to engage with Platypus. James wrote in *PR* 9,[44] and David responded to Chris's piece on Korsch in *PR* 18. When Platypus member Lucy went to Great Britain, we couldn't hand her a bunch of recruits, but she did have a sense of the Left there and people she could invite onto panels, etc. Despite all the dramatic success in Germany, we've had an immense success in Great Britain — I'm sure as painful as that has been for Lucy. When you look at the history of the panels our members have put on and the quality of members we have had coming out of Britain, that's an extremely important side of the international extension of Platypus.

IM: And there's our spread in the U.S., which has been slow-moving and happened at different moments. We had more international growth than U.S. growth for a while; our U.S. growth has been more recent. That's probably similar to the way the DSA has emerged and was conditioned by the fact that there is a wider milieu in the U.S. for a conversation about Left politics.

I appreciate the self-criticism of folks from Platypus, to reconsider former positions that oneself had taken. This is valuable. My question has to do with defining the Left. You have written a lot about that, but it's being used in several different ways here. When you said, the Left today feels this or that, or takes this position — I don't recognize that in the milieu that I run in. You talked about the Bernie Sanders campaign and the people in it as part of the Left and DSA and Jacobin, *but what about* Monthly Review[45] *and other things you have not mentioned? There are many other magazines, journals, collectives, like Science for the People.*[46] *How do you intersect with that?*

Has Platypus addressed the questions of ecology and the future of complex life on this planet? The ecology movements, which are huge, have many different tendencies within themselves, and seem ripe for people to take up. They don't deal with the question of class at all, but they don't eliminate it either; they're open for this type of discussion.

IM: It is partly a matter of geography that we meet certain people. We started in Chicago, so there were certain milieus that we were closer to. The founder of Food Not Bombs, who is located in Santa Cruz and was on a recent Platypus forum there, is heavily involved in ecology and food issues. Some of it is just the character of what students perceive as the Left, and we take them as honest observers. We use the topics and leading figures that they intersect to fill out our events. We have certain weaknesses depending on the different kinds of milieus that we are able to intersect, the students that we meet. But we also made conscious turns in direction to balance these weaknesses. To give one example, which was led by Spencer, we spent a good amount of time looking at the New Communist Movement and at the time I wasn't sure why we would do that. I wondered, "We just did the 60s, why would we do the New Communist Movement?" But that turned out to be a more interesting than expected engagement for us at the time. It strengthened our understanding of particular problems of party building and what people thought when they went back to Marxism.

To answer your question about the meaning of the Left, Platypus addresses that on a philosophical level and in the broadest sense of the bourgeois revolutions — the French Revolution, the American Revolution, etc. We ask what the consequences of that political introduction to the world of capitalism are. It is good that we also address the Left on a philosophical level and not specifically in terms of Marxism, because it allows us to give students the ability to intersect all these different milieus, like the ecology milieu, etc.

ER: Two examples come to mind, one is Adolph Reed and the other is some *Monthly Review* readers of the New Left generation that I know in Chicago. In Platypus — even though we should know better by now — there was a feeling of collective disappointment when Adolph Reed came out and endorsed Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election. This revealed all of his prior critiques to be effectively negotiating, bargaining. But at the end of the day, he found himself as an avowed pop-frontist back to endorsing the Democratic Party Center. That pointed to how even the New Left generation critics, when seemingly spontaneous popular movements, like the Sanders campaign, arose on the Left, got pulled into them and blunted their critique. From the perspective of political and historical education, they got worse and abdicated the responsibility that we had collectively took them to be taking up earlier when there was less activism going on for them to intersect.

Before I came to Platypus, I was in a reading group with some New Left generation radicals and I learned a lot from them. *Monthly Review* articles often appeared on the reading-group list. I did not track those folks when the *Jacobin* reading groups proliferated, but I can only suspect that I would have learned a lot less from them had I been attending a *Jacobin* reading group with them, than I did years earlier. Again, they blunted their critique: "Here are all these Millennials; we have to appeal to them. we have to soften our position to compromise with their political horizons." I'm not saying that it's impossible to do that sort of educational work without making such compromises. But that is what I suspect has happened, and I have heard reports of that. Reed is a more prominent example, but there are probably hundreds of thousands of more everyday examples like that on the Left. Even from the horizon of the best of the New Left, we have seen a lowering of horizons in this period.

I want to ask about the Occupy moment as a disorienting period for Platypus. At that time, I was in New York. I was just talking to our member Nunzia about my experience in Occupy there and how bizarre it was. We would end up in these "salons" in the Upper West Side with people doing coke in the back, hanging out and arguing about what prank they could pull off in Zuccotti Park. Alex Callinicos's grandson and Laurie Penny were there, and I thought, "What do I do? How am I a Platypus member here? What is my intervention going to be about?" I remember reading Adolph Reed's "Liberals, I Do Despise," because we had to bring in something to read. It was confusing. Tom, you spoke about change and unpreparedness for it. I remember, when we were in the anti-war movement in Chicago, the way that we talked to the Spartacists, the way that I felt at my best as a Platypus member. I knew their positions during the 1970s and the Iranian Revolution, and I could read them back to them: "You had this serious position and your current perspective on our political present doesn't correspond to your past insights." The anarchists of Occupy didn't take themselves seriously enough to be intersected at the level of politics. In some respects, we are inheriting that apolitical Left, and it's difficult to — as we say in Platypus — "squeeze blood from the turnip" and to turn that Left into a potential object lesson for Platypus. We are stuck in disorienting, post-Occupy confusion. What can be done with that? Is it something we can "avoid"? Or is it something we need to come to terms with?

TC: I had the same experience when I went to Occupy; I wouldn't know how to talk to people there. A lot of the engagements that Platypus organized afterwards — the interview with David Graeber[48] and related panels — were well thought-out, reflective, and give a good sense of what the history and ideological motivations of the organizers of Occupy were. At the protests, it wasn't easy to identify these people in the way you might be able to identify the Spartacists at anti-war protests. I was weighing in on this question of the audience in my opening remarks, because a point of confusion for me was the question, who is the audience for Platypus in the context of Platypus? Are we going there to create an audience for ourselves? In retrospect the answer is no, we went to Occupy with contacts to expose them to the Left. That's what we would do with any activism. We aim to bring the organizers to campus, so that we can get a more productive and effective engagement out of them. That's not to downplay your point about the ability to go back through the Spartacists' history in this period and to engage with them on that basis. This was possible to a lesser degree with Occupy.

SL: Occupy taught us about what the Left is, what it means to recognize anarchism as the Left, and to think about that problem historically. I remember two major comments in our own pedagogy: first, Adorno talking about anarchism as the reappearance of a ghost in signaling the failure of Marxism in the 60s,[49] and second, the more pointed analysis of Lenin about anarchism representing a critique of the statism of the Social Democratic Party of Germany and of Second International Marxism more generally in *State and Revolution* (1917). The problem that we had in Occupy was trying to get the anarchists to evince this critique of the failure of Marxism, in a way that we could recognize and engage.

OH: We are also dealing with the absence of politics. We are trying to make these people recognize that what they think is politics is a symptom of reduced expectations. It comes up in the "socialist turn" in lifestyle-ism — anarchism — in the moral critiques of capitalism. It's an absence of politics that we see when the conception of politics itself is a result of the historical failure of the Left. I like Postone's "History and Helplessness" for thinking about things that seem inevitable on the Left as symptoms of helplessness and how anarchism and its comedic aspects are an expression of helplessness. I agree with Tom that it's about getting our audience to think about that in terms of the Left rather than getting an Occupier to think about it.

In Cincinnati, Leftists are running a prison-abolition reading group; at the same time you hear calls to "jail the rapists" and to "jail the killer cops." Platypus member Bryce asked a question about this contradiction in a DSA reading group and the response was, "of course, we are not going to actually do this." It's the acknowledgement that they don't have the power to abolish prisons; it's an expression of moral outrage. This isn't politics; this is the existential crisis of living under capitalism. But it's a complicated thing that you have to point to something that was considered politics to say that it isn't politics, which might become more and more difficult.

IM: During the anti-war period and in my own development of figuring out what Marxism is, I looked dismissively at anarchism, and I had the idea that labor solidarity and unions are more serious, as if there were a hierarchy that put labor unions above anarchism. I've learned how the different types of Leftism get at certain issues better. I was dismissive of Occupy and I didn't do any Platypus activity during Obama's second term because I didn't think there was anything interesting happening politically. In retrospect, some of the critiques of our electoral system, money in politics, etc., which were strong themes in the Occupy movement, could be a solid direction for a future Left. It might be a better starting place than reforming the labor movement, which is an intractable problem in the U.S. One of the challenges for refounding Left politics is taking these different strands seriously, because they represent important roadblocks that the Left remains stuck on. When I go to the anarchist bookfair in Oakland and see what those people are doing, they are more embedded in Bay area politics than the DSA is, which only canvasses for ballot measures. They have different characteristics to them and part of the problem is that they have been fractured and divided and that people have made a principal out of different defeats the Left has experienced. Those are the ideological roadblocks that we have to confront on the Left. It's tricky because certain aspects of the Left seem goofier at different times, which can be a false positive.

SL: Occupy was the moment when the younger members of Platypus felt the salience of an older history, particularly the immediacy of the Seattle precedent, and how the Graeberites and others were clearly waiting out the anti-war movement and reappeared in Occupy. Occupy potentially deepened the question of Marxism, or socialism more generally, as a critique of democracy. I said in my opening remarks that Occupy turned our attention to the issues of liberalism and democracy, because that is where the roots of anarchism are. The sense of the oppressiveness of democracy was deeper for a lot of our members, and it's not surprising to me that the depth of the question of Bonapartism became clearer and emphasized in pedagogy, if you look back across the history of pedagogues calls and the way we read these texts, the overarching way in which the problem of the Left has appeared to Platypus.

ER: As a younger member who joined the project later and was not part of the founding moment, Occupy made me disinterested in anarchism, but the "socialist turn" completely renewed my interest in anarchism and its history and politics, ironically. Because I finally, through the "socialist turn," came to recognize that a political party for socialism would undertake mass organization in civil society in a way that would resemble anarchism, both historical and even to a certain extent contemporary anarchism.

One of the biggest obstacles to Platypus's role and goals is its obscurity and complexity. How has Platypus dealt with this?

How has Platypus forgotten about itself, eliding things intentionally or not? I ask this in relation to Tom. Platypus once said, "Revolution 2017!," which is something I would have never learned from any member. This question is drawn to Ed's and Spencer's remarks. One might have the feeling that the history of the Left gets revealed to us as we move through these phrases, e.g., democracy and the party question becoming clearer. Is the nature of politics and society becoming clearer to us?

OH: What is becoming clear is the opacity of society.

IM: There are different registers that you have to deal with. Our fora try to address basic topics, like democracy, and that is the best way to introduce a student into these issues. I was surprised at a DSA event that they were holding at Berkeley, which was an event where they wanted to get people involved in one of their canvassing campaigns, but all the undergraduates kept on raising their hand, asking things like, "what is socialism?" That is what is appealing to certain people, and that is the starting place.

To answer the second question, *I* had forgotten the anti-war stuff the most. I became desensitized to the typical anti-imperialist politics, and when people are bringing this up I don't really engage it, even though I was really animated by that in an earlier period. I don't know if I have processed whether it's good or not that I brushed that off. But I'm glad it's not the central theme.

SL: What is really obscure is a panel like this, that is deeply navel gazing at a fundamental level in terms of our own history. The issue is — which is why I read the quote at the beginning of my opening remarks — that Platypus is an organized attempt to try to learn from the present. The present reveals the past in different ways at different moments. The question of the phases of Platypus, the history of Platypus, trying to convey that, is precisely the attempt to learn from our own activity, from the present in an accumulating way, which is the real point. The real obscurity for a new member lies in the way in which to be a student of the present is also to be a student of our own activity through time. That is the only resource that we have. That is to underscore the assumptions behind putting on this panel, which is what these questions relate to.

TC: To answer the second question about things that have been elided and what has been forgotten, it's funny that you raise the point about "Revolution in 2017!," because I was thinking about that when I wrote my opening remarks, specifically in regard to the point I was trying to make about how Platypus is attempting to not impart actionable knowledge so much as an experience of the present as conditioned by deeper history. When I first joined Platypus, there was this notion that the goal is revolution by 2017, but looking back, Platypus never had a clear sense of means and ends for that to happen. It is integral to what Platypus is doing that we can't try to answer that question of how we would make revolution by 2017. There are things that Platypus just can't do. Platypus remains necessary *as an independent activity*, because for Platypus to support itself in any practical or more positive way, we would lose something essential about the critical role we are trying to play. The price of that is that we can't do the other things, which is to answer the means-ends question. We have a means-ends relationship between our activity and provoking recognition of the problem, but that's a different issue.

Regarding the third question, my experience in Platypus has been a series of disorientations and the necessity to relearn things. This can also be related to the first question. Confusion is also integral to Platypus. We don't necessarily want people to not be confused.

ER: In response to the second question about what we have forgotten, I pitched my remarks to try to recover what we might forget or what has made us uncomfortable, organizationally, and for good reasons. With respect to "Revolution 2017," one thought that comes to mind is that we did witness "Revolution 2017" in the sense of capitalist revolution, or arguably bourgeois revolution in capitalist form, in 2017. That relates to the question of the nature of politics and society. Through a Platypus education, we can understand how Trump signals both revolution and conservatism, how neoliberalism in its time likewise was revolutionary and conservative, and the same can be said of Keynesian Fordism and progressive Wilsonianism. These are big framing ideas, which gets at something we are trying to work through in our project in a way that I don't see much of the rest of the Left working through.

In comparison to when I first came around the project to now, we now feel like a group of teachers, people who are teaching themselves and each other. It often felt like a clique — we were talking about smartism at that time — because it seemed difficult to access the project, including for reasons of social integration. But we were also not necessarily teaching ourselves and each other effectively on the basis of what we were learning. We should all be embracing something of a teacherly ethos — and we have, as a project over the past seven years or so. **|P**

Transcribed by Tobias Rochlitz

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[1] International Bolshevik Tendency. The IBT was formed when it split from the international Spartacist tendency (now known as the International Communist League (Fourth International)) in 1982.

[2] Communist Party of Great Britain. The original CPGB was founded in 1920 and dissolved in 1991. The current Communist Party of Great Britain (Provisional Central Committee) was founded in the early 1990s, and publishes the *Weekly Worker*.

[3] Video of the event is available at <https://youtu.be/C1JFOB5I6BY>.

[4] Ca. 2000s.

[5] Moishe Postone, "History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism," *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (January 2006), 93–110.

[6] Iraqi Communist Party, "Letter to Fraternal and Friendly Parties About the Situation in Iraq and the Position of the Iraqi Communist Party" (2006), <https://platypus1917.org/2024/04/01/44538/>.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Postone, "History and Helplessness," 110.

[9] Siyaves Azeri, Hamid Dabashi, and Chris Cutrone, "The Green Movement and the Left: Prospects for democracy in Iran" (March 20, 2010), hosted by Platypus at the Left Forum in New York, <https://platypus1917.org/2010/03/20/the-green-movement-and-the-left-prospects-for-democracy-in-iran/>.

[10] Chris Cutrone, Issam Shukri, Ashley Smith, "The Left and prospects for democracy in the Middle East: Iraq" (March 20, 2010), hosted by Platypus at the Left Forum in New York, <https://platypus1917.org/2010/03/20/the-left-and-prospects-for-democracy-in-the-middle-east-iraq/>.

[11] The Platypus Affiliated Society, "What is a Platypus? On surviving the extinction of the Left," <https://platypus1917.org/project/what-is-a-platypus-on-surviving-the-extinction-of-the-Left/>.

[12] Benjamin Blumberg, Chris Cutrone, Atiya Khan, Spencer A. Leonard, and Richard Rubin, "The decline of the Left in the 20th century: Toward a theory of historical regression," *Platypus Review* 17 (November 2009), <https://platypus1917.org/the-decline-of-the-Left-in-the-20th-century/>.

[13] Spencer A. Leonard, "Going it alone: Christopher Hitchens and the death of the Left," *Platypus Review* 11 (March 2009), <https://platypus1917.org/2009/03/15/going-it-alone-christopher-hitchens-and-the-death-of-the-Left/>.

[14] Chris Cutrone, "Iraq and the election: The fog of 'anti-war' politics," *Platypus Review* 7 (October 2008), <https://platypus1917.org/2008/10/01/iraq-and-the-election-the-fog-of-anti-war-politics/>.

[15] Chris Cutrone, "Book review: Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*," *Platypus Review* 15 (September 2009), <https://platypus1917.org/2009/09/03/book-review-karl-korsch-marxism-and-philosophy/>.

[16] David Black, "Comments on Chris Cutrone's review of *Marxism and Philosophy* by Karl Korsch," *Platypus Review* 18 (December 2009), <https://platypus1917.org/2009/12/06/comments-on-chris-cutrones-review-of-marxism-and-philosophy-by-karl-korsch/>; Chris Cutrone, "Rejoinder to David Black: On Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*," *Platypus Review* 20 (February 2010), <https://platypus1917.org/2010/02/26/rejoinder-to-david-black-on-karl-korschs-marxism-and-philosophy/>.

[17] *The Platypus Review Reader*, ed. Spencer A. Leonard (Ann Arbor: Platypus Publishing, 2015).

[18] Danny Postel, Kaveh Ehsani, Maziar Behrooz, and Chris Cutrone, "30 years of the Islamic Revolution in Iran," *Platypus Review* 20 (February 2010), <https://platypus1917.org/2010/02/18/30-years-of-the-islamic-revolution-in-iran/>.

[19] Chris Cutrone, "Egypt, or, history's invidious comparisons: 1979, 1789, and 1848," *Platypus Review* 33 (March 2011), <https://platypus1917.org/2011/03/01/egypt-or-historys-invidious-comparisons-1979-1789-and-1848/>.

[20] See Osha Neumann, Mark Rudd, Tim Wohlforth, and Alan Spector, "Rethinking the New Left," *Platypus Review* 30 (December 2010), <https://platypus1917.org/2010/12/01/rethinking-the-new-Left/>; Carl Davidson, Tom Riley, and Mel Rothenberg, "The Marxist turn: The New Left in the 1970s," *Platypus Review* 40 (October 2011), <https://platypus1917.org/2011/09/26/the-marxist-turn-1970s/>.

[21] Spencer A. Leonard, "Up in the air: The legacy of the New Communist Movement: An interview with Max Elbaum," *Platypus Review* 30 (December 2010), <https://platypus1917.org/2010/12/01/up-in-the-air-the-legacy-of-the-new-communist-movement/>; Spencer A. Leonard, "'Thirty years of counter-revolution': An interview with Clyde Young," *Platypus Review* 43 (February 2012), <https://platypus1917.org/2012/01/29/interview-with-clyde-young/>; Spencer A. Leonard, "Overcoming bourgeois right: An interview with Mel Rothenberg," *Platypus Review* 34 (April 2011), <https://platypus1917.org/2011/04/03/overcoming-bourgeois-right-an-interview-with-mel-rothenberg/>.

[22] Jerzy Sobotta, "Rosa Luxemburg's corpse: The stench of decay on the German Left, 1932–2009," *Platypus Review* 16 (October 2009), <https://platypus1917.org/2009/10/10/rosa-luxemburgs-corpse/>.

[23] Sunit Singh, "Book Review: Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*," *Platypus Review* 21 (March 2010), <https://platypus1917.org/2010/03/15/book-review-frantz-fanon-black-skin-white-masks/>.

[24] Haseeb Ahmed, "Book review: Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*," *Platypus Review* 16 (October 2009), <https://platypus1917.org/2009/10/10/book-review-detlev-claussen-theodor-w-adorno-one-last-genius/>; Bret Schneider, "Book review: Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*," *Platypus Review* 21 (March 2010), <https://platypus1917.org/2010/03/15/book-review-theodor-w-adorno-philosophy-of-new-music/>.

[25] Chris, Cutrone, "Gillian Rose's 'Hegelian' critique of Marxism: Book review: Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*," *Platypus Review* 21 (March 2019), <https://platypus1917.org/2010/03/15/gillian-roses-hegelian-critique-of-marxism/>.

[26] Chris Cutrone, "Against dogmatic abstraction: A critique of Cindy Milstein on anarchism and Marxism," *Platypus Review* 25 (July 2010), <https://platypus1917.org/2010/07/01/against-dogmatic-abstraction/>.

[27] Chris Cutrone, "Chinoiserie: A critique of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA's 'New Synthesis,'" *Platypus Review* 26 (August 2010), <https://platypus1917.org/2010/08/05/chinoiserie-a-critique-of-the-revolutionary-communist-party-usas-new-synthesis/>.

[28] Chris Cutrone, "The Marxist hypothesis: A response to Alain Badiou's 'communist hypothesis,'" *Platypus Review* 29 (November 2010), <https://platypus1917.org/2010/11/06/the-marxist-hypothesis-a-response-to-alain-badous-communist-hypothesis/>.

[29] Ian Morrison, Susan Williams, Jason Wright, "Trotsky's Marxism" (March 19, 2011), <https://youtu.be/oyTyG4nFZAQ>. For the opening remarks of Jason Wright and Ian Morrison on this panel, see: Jason Wright, "Trotsky's Marxism: 'The point, however, is to change it,'" *Platypus Review* 35 (May 2011), <https://platypus1917.org/2011/05/05/trotskys-marxism-the-point-however-is-to-change-it/>; and Ian Morrison, "Trotsky's Marxism," *Platypus Review* 37 (July 2011), <https://platypus1917.org/2011/07/01/trotskys-marxism-platypus-review/>.

[30] Stephen Eric Bronner, Greg Gabrellas, Ben Shepard, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg" (March 19, 2011), <https://archive.org/details/TheMarxismOfRosaLuzemburg>; Chris Cutrone, Paul Le Blanc, Ian Morrison, Lars T. Lih, "Lenin's Marxism" (March 19, 2011), <https://youtu.be/pBT4Y8sMFzg>; Timothy Bewes, Jeremy Cohen, Chris Cutrone, Timothy Hall, Neil Larsen, Marco Torres, "Lukács's Marxism" (March 19, 2011), <https://youtu.be/9164kAaFTPI>.

[31] Bryan Palmer, Jason Wright, Mike Macnair, and Richard Rubin, "The legacy of Trotskyism," *Platypus Review* 82 (December 2015 – January 2016), <https://platypus1917.org/2015/12/17/sandernistas-final-triumph-1980s/>.

[32] Chris Cutrone, Andrew Feenberg, Richard Westerman, and Nicholas Brown, "The politics of Critical Theory," *Platypus Review* 37 (July 2011), <https://platypus1917.org/2011/07/09/the-politics-of-critical-theory/>.

[33] Carl Davidson, Tom Riley, and Mel Rothenberg, "The Marxist turn: The New Left in the 1970s"; Chris Cutrone, "Lenin's politics: A rejoinder to David Adam on Lenin's liberalism"; David Adam, "Lenin the liberal? A reply to Chris Cutrone," *Platypus Review* 40 (October 2011),<https://platypus1917.org/category/pr/issue-40/>; and Chris Cutrone, "Lenin's liberalism," *Platypus Review* 36 (June 2011), <https://platypus1917.org/2011/06/01/lenins-liberalism/>.

[34] Neumann, Rudd, Wohlforth, and Spector, "Rethinking the New Left."

[35] Chris Cutrone, "The Sandernistas: The final triumph of the 1980s," *Platypus Review* 82 (December 2015 – January 2016), <https://platypus1917.org/2015/12/17/sandernistas-final-triumph-1980s/>.

[36] Gregor Baszak and Spencer A. Leonard, "'To unite the many': An interview with Adolph L. Reed, Jr.," *Platypus Review* 75 (April 2015), <https://platypus1917.org/2015/04/04/unite-many-interview-adolph-l-reed-jr/>.

[37] Chris Cutrone, "Why not Trump?," *Platypus Review* 89 (September 2016), <https://platypus1917.org/2016/09/06/why-not-trump/>.

[Endnotes 38–49 available online]

for the first time. I don't remember when we did "The decline of the Left in the 20th century" for the first time, but I was asked to be on it — that was effectively my recruitment to Platypus.[12] I was included basically on Chris's say so, as I didn't yet know myself as a Platypus member — or indeed, that this was the culmination of my friendship with Chris that would forever be mediated through this project. I had never done Platypus and, if there was a moment in which I was recruited, participating in that panel and, soon thereafter, writing the Christopher Hitchens piece were my recruitment.[13] As my contribution to "The decline of the Left in the 20th century" shows, as was deliberate, I was a student of Ben Blumberg's and Ian Morrison's particularly. I remember having issue 7 of the *PR* open in front of me when I wrote my bit.

In terms of my place in the history of Platypus, I was there and helped to reawaken to politics Chris. In the phrase we used to employ, Platypus was born when two, Chris and Richard, became three, those two and me. But, I am not a member of the first generation of Platypus. When I came along I tried to honor them by respecting what they had done and built, especially in the way that I took up editorship of the *PR*. Ian was editor but he was also president of the organization, and I needed an outlet through which to contribute. I also wanted to teach myself the history of the Left in a disciplined way which I did by throwing myself into reading-group pedagogy. I am forever grateful to the students from those early years for letting me teach, even when, as was sometimes the case, they were more experienced in the readings than I was myself.

I came back to Chicago from my travels doing dissertation research in the autumn of 2008, when Obama was being elected. I've already mentioned cribbing from Ben and Ian for my contribution to "The decline of the Left." Now I'll crib from another article written by a Platypus member for issue 7, Chris's "Iraq and the election: The fog of 'anti-war' politics," to talk about our recognition of the coming of the second phase:

> what [does] "opposition" to the Iraq war policy of the Bush administration really [amount] to. The Democrats' jockeying for position is an excellent frame through which to examine the politics of the war. For the Democrats' criticism of the Bush policy has been transparently opportunist, to seize upon the problems of the war for political gain against the Republicans. Opposition has come only to the extent that the war seemed to be a failed policy, something of which Obama has taken advantage because he was not in the U.S. Senate when the war authorization was voted, and so he has been able to escape culpability for this decision his fellow Democrats made when it was less opportune to oppose the war. . . . Furthermore, opposition to the war on the supposed "Left" has similarly focused on the Bush administration (for example in the very name of the anti-war coalition World Can't Wait, i.e., until the next election, and their call to "Exorcise the Bush Regime"), thus playing directly into the politics of the Democratic Party, resulting now in either passive or active support of the Obama candidacy.[14]

The first phase of Platypus was already at an end when I joined the organization we know today. This was accomplished even before Obama won the election inasmuch as he had already effectively vacuumed up the anti-war movement. If the 2016 election revealed the Left to be — as Chris and I often bitched on the phone — "Democrats, nothing but Democrats," this was already plainly revealed (again) in 2008.

The Obama election, including the political absorption of the anti-war movement that took place in the lead-up to the election, occasioned what we in Platypus term our "second phase," a period of time that extended from mid-2008, let's say, until September 2011 when Occupy began (though Platypus ran on inertia in spite of Occupy for some time afterwards). It was a period in which Platypus turned inwards in the sense of paying close attention to, and in a sense advertising to the Left, our own internal pedagogy. Thus, for instance, in an early issue of the *PR* under my editorship appeared an article by Chris on Karl Korsch.[15] This was something that I had, so to speak, commissioned as a book review of a then recent re-edition of *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923). This prompted a response from British Marxist-Humanist David Black to which Chris replied in turn.[16]

Likewise, this was the period when Ian and Ben Blumberg wrote major studies for the *PR*, some of which can be found in the *Platypus Review Reader* (2015).[17] This was a period in which Platypus's self-education was put on display. At the level of fora, this had begun earlier with the failed attempt at organizing a "40 years of 1968" panel early in 2008, but that had a different impetus. The following year, there was a less *motivated*, though still excellent, "historical" panel on 30 years of the Iranian Revolution.[18] In other words, in the face of the dramatic, though seemingly now quite forgotten Green Movement in Iran, we addressed the issue through a historical lens. Chris followed up this intervention in the same mode with his piece on the Arab Spring — addressing the historical analogies of 1789, 1848, and 1917 — that followed the Iranian Green Movement some year and a half later.[19] Over two years after the failed 1968 panel, the University of Chicago chapter staged panels on the 1960s and 70s, in which the earlier openness of the New Left to being superseded was much less in evidence than it had been at the time of the founding of the New SDS, the time of Platypus's own founding.[20] At the same time, by pairing the 60s panel with another on the 70s we underscored our own, as well as the New Left's, "Marxist turn." I prepared for and followed up on this 70s initiative with a series of interviews on Radical Minds addressing 70s vintage Maoism in dialogue with veterans of the New Communist Movement Max Elbaum, Clyde Young, Mel Rothenberg, and others.[21]

At this time, largely as part of my role in the Org. Comm., Platypus came out of the closet as Marxists and, in a sense, as scholars of the history of the Left. In this period, Jerzy wrote on Rosa Luxemburg,[22] Sunit on Fanon,[23] Haseeb and Bret Schneider on Adorno.[24] Chris followed up his writings on Korsch with another on Gillian Rose,[25] on Cindy Millstein and anarchism,[26] as with an open address to then relatively vital sectarianism, the RCP and its attempt at a new synthesis of communism[27] coupled with a critique of Alain Badiou.[28] We came to address the Marxian Left as intellectuals. For this reason, around this time I remember laments that we couldn't engage the Spartacist League, since their writings — whether on the black question, or on the history of Lenin and the Bolsheviks — formed a part of the reading group syllabus, as they still do. At the same time, we began to engage the IBT, first in the 70s panel and then at the 2011 Left Forum, at which Jason Wright participated on our panel on Trotsky.[29] This Left Forum was probably the clearest expression of the aspect of the second phase I'm highlighting here. There we put on panels on Trotsky, Luxemburg, Lenin, and Lukács, at which spoke, in addition to Jason Wright, Timothy Bewes, Jeremy Cohan, Chris Cutrone, Greg Gabrellas, Timothy Hall, Paul LeBlanc, Lars Lih, Ian Morrison, Marco Torres, and Susan Williams.[30] That was in March 2011. In April, we hosted the third annual Platypus Convention, the second plenary being the "The legacy of Trotskyism" at which spoke Richard Rubin, Mike Macnair, Bryan Palmer, and Jason Wright.[31] Richard Westerman and Andrew Feenberg at the "The politics of Critical Theory" panel at that convention helped to build on our engagements with respect to Lukács at the Left Forum.[32]

That summer we operated in much the same mode at the Marxist Literary Group conference here in Chicago. In the summer of 2011, Chris and I repaid Mike Macnair's visit to our Convention with a residency at the CPGB's Communist University. The month Occupy broke out, the issue that we carried to it that October contained the transcript of the panel I had organized on the "Marxist turn" with Carl Davidson, Tom Riley of the IBT, and Mel Rothenberg of Sojourner Truth as well as Chris's rejoinder to David Adam's response to the piece that, in many respects, represents the culmination of our output in the second phase, namely Chris's "Lenin's liberalism," first publicly presented at the Left Forum earlier in the year.[33]

All of this contributed to a sense of a strongly integrated approach to developing a Platypus perspective on the history of Marxism and its potential relevance today that we had not engaged previously and that we could not perpetuate on into the third phase. Because Occupy intervened. This has meant that the question of Marxism (and even of socialism) had to be bracketed, in favor of the question of democracy, specifically liberal reformism and neo-anarchism. And this transition occasioned a crisis in our organization. At any event, as Occupy waned, the "Marxist Left" began to reemerge, for instance at the anti-NATO protests in Chicago, after having been scarce during the period of Occupy's emergence. In conclusion, the second phase laid the foundations for many of the difficulties Platypus has experienced in responding to and engaging Occupy and the Left more generally and most fully extentiated, if you will, the Marxist intellectuals of the next generation. The engagement with Marxism and the history of Marxism, putting on panels around anniversaries, the whole question of perennial topics, which we always fight against — all of these are legacies of the second phase.

Tom Carey: I was politicized before Platypus to a certain degree. I grew up in a radical-liberal family, my mother had vaguely New Left views. When I was 16, in high school, we had to do research projects and I came upon the history of the United Fruit Company. This led me down the path of anti-imperialist Leftism, which happened purely through the internet and was mostly concerned with the past. That was also during the time of the George W. Bush presidency. When I came to college, I already considered myself a socialist and I was looking for socialist groups to get involved with. When I came upon Platypus, it seemed obvious to me at first. This was partly because my introduction to the Left had largely been through studying history and I didn't really know any Leftists. I thought that the Left is a historical artifact and we need to interrogate that to go through its failures and grapple with those. It was during the deep engagement with the 1960s and 70s Left when I got involved in Platypus — the period that Spencer described towards the end of his opening remarks. My first Platypus panel was the one on 1968 with Mark Rudd and Osha Neumann.[34] Those were people who I had seen as the "cool rebels" in high school, but I didn't know much about it. It had a profound effect on me to see them on the panel in real life and to realize that they really didn't know what they were doing and seeing them admit that. This stripped a lot of my assumptions about the 1960s being a high point.

To give you an idea about what attracted me to Platypus, I will share an anecdote. Early on, I went to a talk with David Harvey, and Tana, a Platypus member, made a comment after the event. She mentioned how nowadays the political imagination of the Left had narrowed such that, when people think about socialism, they no longer think about transforming the productive relations of society but think of it in terms of redistribution. I thought: holy shit, that's how I had been thinking of socialism — in terms of redistribution. Her comment was intriguing and I wanted to dig deeper.

That year, I signed up for Spencer's class and I came to the reading group religiously, attended the panels, and did — at this fortuitous moment in Platypus's phase of the "Marxist turn" — a deep dive into the history of both Marxism and the New Left. When Occupy happened, Chris was saying that a lot of the membership was unprepared for it. I was definitely in that category. I didn't know how to engage with this phenomenon. To a large degree I just dismissed it, because in comparison to Platypus — which seemed ambitious and serious because of its emphasis on setting the bar according to historical horizons of possibility — Occupy seemed to lack historical perspective and high horizons, and to be subject to all these anarchist thought taboos. I didn't see it as something interesting or to believe in. I tended to avoid it.

Partly for that reason, I was hesitant to agree to be on this panel, because I felt that Occupy wasn't that much of a learning moment for me, unfortunately. But, after reflecting on Platypus's engagement with Occupy over the following year, there were some things that I took away from it. Platypus's subsequent digestion of Occupy helped me to situate it as a recrudescence in many ways of the anti-globalization movement that had emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when neo-anarchist currents were attempting to formulate a post-Marxist horizontalist paradigm that substituted reform or revolution with resistance. I learned how the changing administrations from Clinton in the 90s, to Bush and the Iraq War in the 2000s, and then to Obama had a profound impact on the symptomatic expression of Left discontents. In other words, the passing of the anti-war movement with Obama's election opened the door for a return of the anti-neoliberal Left, which had been sidelined by the new lease on life that the Iraq War had given to the anti-imperialist Marxist Left. Finally, Platypus's engagement with neo-anarchism got me to see that Occupy was an opportunity to repose the question of the nature of capitalism and therefore Marxism, perhaps in a more direct way than the focus on imperialism had provided during the anti-war movement.

All of this was a far cry from my initial instincts, which was simply to dismiss Occupy as woefully inadequate, which no doubt it was. The difference is that whatever its inadequacies, there was something to learn from Occupy about our moment in history, and without Platypus I wouldn't have thought about it that way at all.

I want to address the main questions that I gathered from the panel description: who is Platypus for? How do we assess our progress? How do we identify our audience? How do we become Platypus for them? I attempted to address these questions on a high level. Our audience is students. I see this as strategic in several senses. First, because the problem we face is one of the accumulation of ideological obstacles and a discontinuity of historical consciousness. The open-minded desire to learn, that college students, and especially undergraduate students, typically harbor, makes them a natural audience for Platypus's more circumspect and reflective pedagogy. On the flip side, this is what makes those already politicized by the Left generally a poor audience for our project, because they tend to lack this required open-mindedness. Secondly, the existing Left, whether activist or academic, is primarily found around college campuses, and therefore that is where we can make the greatest ideological intervention against miseducating practices and pedagogies of the existing Left.

We become Platypus for our audience when we challenge them to recognize the diminished political horizons of the present-day Left, which was a formative moment for me when I came to Platypus. We achieve this by raising the history of the Left, particularly 1917, as a problem to be considered, not as a positive example to be copied but as the tradition that both revealed and grappled with the problem of overcoming capitalism at the deepest level hitherto, in both theory and in practice. The point is to cast the present-day Left into critical relief, in order to make both our distance from the past and diminished political horizons properly felt. This is inevitably frustrating for those who are seeking answers to the question of what is to be done now, because what Platypus offers isn't so much knowledge in this sense but an experience, namely to *feel* the death of the Left as a reality in all of its historical gravity. This also makes it difficult to assess our progress as an organization, I believe, because there is no clear means-ends relationship between the cultivation of one's sensibility, or the ability to experience a certain reality, and actually changing that reality. At most, we can say that recognizing the death of the Left in this deeper sense of experiencing it is a precondition to actual practical knowledge and its overcoming. Perhaps anxiety over this means-ends ambiguity has led to Platypus's various problematic formulations over the years such as "draining the swamp," "psychoanalyst of the Left," "training the next generation of revolutionaries." As analogies, each of these phrases provides a way of conceptually closing the gap between means and ends: the patient of psychoanalysis is ultimately cured of his neurosis, and cleared swamps allow for new growth. They are problematic precisely because they apply a direct relationship where there is not.

The problems that Platypus faces today are related. We have always maintained that Platypus makes a necessary but insufficient contribution in order for the reconstitution of the Left to be possible. When I first got involved in Platypus, a common formulation was that we sought to reconstitute the object of our critique, which I took to mean not so much transforming the Left itself but the idea that, indirectly, Platypus may have an effect of producing a project that would be more interesting, if still problematic. In retrospect, the few things that have been inspired — or influenced in their inception — by Platypus, like *Jacobin* magazine, have been less interesting rather than more. This hasn't panned out — if it was ever clear what it meant.

I want to finish by addressing the question that has been raised at this year's convention: why still do Platypus? The reason to still do Platypus is because it remains necessary, even if the other aspects needed for a Left to reemerge have not been fulfilled and cannot be fulfilled by Platypus. Taking stock of the present as a product of the Left's death and recognizing our distance from past emancipatory horizons both remains necessary and insufficient as a precondition for the reconstitution of the Left today. There is a lot to be said for what Platypus has accomplished in this regard. For now, we are several generations removed from our founding cohort — and I continue to be impressed by the younger generation. The *PR* is a testament to our organization's ability to register the history of the present, even if it isn't always used to its fullest potential by the membership as a whole. Nurturing recognition of the problem is a precarious undertaking that can't simply be considered accomplished in a linear fashion. I personally am aware, to a greater or lesser degree, of the depth of the problems that we are facing as a function of my involvement with Platypus.

Ed Remus: I prepared my remarks in complete ignorance of the prompt and the questions, knowing only the period that I was asked to address. My remarks are an extended reflection on the passage Chris wrote to the members' list, which Spencer quoted in his presentation, to the effect that shifts in direction in our project run the risk of throwing off members who have committed themselves to one particular area of work.

I've been asked to address the long fourth phase. I take this phase to span roughly from the end of the Occupy movement to the beginning of the Sanders campaign for the Democratic Party's 2016 presidential nomination. Occupy emerged in September 2011 and dissipated during the following winter, marking a rough beginning of the fourth phase — though the spirit of Occupy was periodically revived throughout the following year, for example during the efforts to protest the G8 (and originally NATO) summit held in May 2012 in Chicago. We engaged these efforts during our 2012 Convention. Bookending the fourth phase on the opposite side, the Sanders campaign gripped the American Left during the second half of 2015; the Democratic Party presidential primary debates were held that October and Chris's "Sandernistas" article appeared in the December 2015 – January 2016 issue of the *PR*.[35] Insofar as Platypus intersects the Left and the Left remains an adjunct of the Democratic Party — which it does — we can think of our long fourth phase as the consolidation of Obama's second term. It was the period of Left accommodation to the Democratic Party Center, *following* the unsuccessful protest of Occupy against that Center and *anticipating* the unsuccessful bid of Sanders to lead that Center.

In the broader social and political climate, neoliberalism could seem triumphant during this years-long consolidation of Obama's second term; as one of our members recently put it, the fourth phase felt like the beginning of the "Thousand-Year Reich" of neoliberalism, in which the Bushes, the Clintons, and the Obamas would ensure the dynastic succession of their political and biological progeny for decades to come. Despite 2012 predictions of the Republican Party's imminent "demographic death," there appeared few options for the Republican Party beyond candidates of the Bush or Romney ilk; and on the opposing side of the "culture wars," identity politics seemed to enjoy an unprecedented hegemony.

I was asked to review the issues of the *PR* published during this period. In doing so, I was reminded of one of our greatest self-critiques: that we had failed, as a project, to engage the Occupy movement sufficiently, perhaps due to our collective academic distaste towards activism, or due to our Marxist distaste towards anarchism. (We would repeat this self-critique in 2014, during Black Lives Matter.) The *PR* issues published between 2012 and 2015 strike me as, if anything, a belated overcorrection of our third-phase shortcomings; issues of Occupy, anarchism, and anti-austerity politics in Europe appear perhaps more consistently during these years than any other topic in the pages of the *PR*. We were trying to capture the moment we felt we had somehow missed. Gregor and Spencer's interview with Adolph Reed dates to this period,[36] and it quickly proved to be one of the most widely-read pieces we had published prior to Chris's "Why not Trump?" article.[37] Despite their apparent dissimilarity, what these two topical engagements, Occupy and Adolph Reed, share in common, is an attention to questions of political economy amidst the neoliberal zenith, whether that of finance capital or of race, two fixtures of the Obama presidency.

The fourth phase also stands out as the period during which perhaps five to ten of our members, a few prominent and others less so, left the organization — one was expelled — first to form the extant Society for Psychoanalytic Inquiry, and then to disperse into various subsequent projects. The political trajectories of these ex-members illuminate a divide on the Left that deepened over the course of the fourth phase, a divide between anarchism-inflected identity politics and social-democracy-inflected welfare laborism. One ex-member, perhaps the most vocal in his critique of Platypus as an internally authoritarian organization, undertook various attempts to found intentional, communal living spaces of artists and cultural producers, including one here in Hyde Park, and also created an art project seeking to convince Kanye West to run for mayor of Chicago. By the end of the fourth phase, however, he had relocated to East Asia, where his livelihood would be less implicated in the perpetuation of the white settler colony to which he had been born. Indeed, by this time, he could be found on Facebook accusing his fellow ex-Platypus friends of belonging to a racist, imperialist, white-supremacist organization. He was referring, of course, to the DSA. Even the fracture of our ex-members, then, manifested in extreme fashion the factional contestation unfolding within the Democratic Party during the long fourth phase.

Though I was nearly dragged along with this small exodus, the organizational and political critiques of Platypus, on which it was based, did not ultimately convince me. I redoubled my membership and helped to generate two panel initiatives: "Third parties and the Left: Problems and prospects,"[38] effectively raising the question of electoral work on the Left, and "The politics of work,"[39] engaging the political implications of various discourses around technological unemployment. At the time, I conflated the question of political party as such with the question of electoral work, in a misunderstanding of the political party as electoralist, in nature; I also, via — at least partially a misreading of — Postone, took Platypus to share a perspective according to which increasing technological unemployment would make it politically possible and necessary for Marxists to demand that the state guarantee full employment, shorter working hours, and a guaranteed minimum income. Despite everything I had learned in the reading group, in other words, it was nearly impossible for me to imagine or conceptualize a political party for socialism organizing civil society and seeking to take state power on that basis. I would only gain something of this understanding later, via pedagogy in Platypus around the "socialist turn." But I was using the tools of our project — especially our panel format — to try to understand why we weren't content to follow *Jacobin* into the DSA.

In retrospect, my engagements with Platypus were manifesting the tectonic political shifts taking place during the long fourth phase, perhaps more than I realized; for although I described the consolidation of Obama's second term as a neoliberal zenith, it was also the period of neoliberal crisis, expressed